Should practical usefulness be considered for theory building in HRD? Traditional versus pragmatism approach

Sana Mumtaz^{1,2}

Accepted: 24 May 2021 / Published online: 28 May 2021
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Abstract

Globalization has led to an increasing emphasis on the critical role of the workforce in the success of organizations. This has resulted in the shift of focus on human resource development (HRD) as the center of attention in the current paradigm. Hence, this article suggests a need to use a comprehensive philosophical paradigm to develop practical theories in HRD and compares the usefulness of positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism philosophies in the theory-building process. Based on fragmented literature in philosophy and HRD disciplines, this theoretical manuscript has assembled and thoroughly reviewed the existing literature to propose new ways of theory building in HRD. The findings guide that despite the usefulness of positivism and interpretivism philosophical paradigms in knowledge generation, these philosophies lead to practically weak theories. Hence, theory building in HRD should be driven by a problem-solving approach rather than only relying on plausibility criteria. It further guides how multi-method and mixed-method research designs might help provide answers to complex and newly emerged challenges in HRD. Overall, this research adds value to a body of knowledge by proposing a unique five-stage framework to develop new theories in HRD using the pragmatism approach. The use of the proposed framework might be beneficial in developing practically and theoretically useful theories in the future.

Keywords Pragmatism · Human resource development · HRD · Theory-building process

1 Introduction

The critical role of management theories and their linkage with societal consequences have been highlighted in a large body of literature (e.g. Douglas et al. 2017; Pfeffer 2005). A theory helps individuals in making sense of the real world and in understanding theoretical aspects of a society from a specific perspective (Dubin 1978). Hence, it has been suggested that theories can change peoples' perception and their thinking patterns by providing a support and rich explanation of the phenomena (Douglas et al. 2017; Hammersley

✉ Sana Mumtaz
sana_mumtaz91@hotmail.com

¹ Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science and Technology (SZABIST), Islamabad, Pakistan

² FAST School of Management, NUCES, Islamabad, Pakistan

1995; Jonker and Pennink 2010). Moreover, robust theories guide individuals in developing associations among several factors (Bacharach 1989), therefore have the potential to alter mechanisms and structures in organizations. The critical role of theories needs to be particularly understood in the context of the development and change experiences of the workforce, as globalization and changing international standards have led to changes in organizations' culture and way of management (Klikauer 2014; Perez 2017). Moreover, these changes have also transformed the human resource development (HRD) function of the organizations (Budd and Hannum 2016). HRD is one of the significant areas that offers practical and realistic solutions for employees' development (McGuire and Cseh 2006). The current circumstances suggest going beyond the motivation of employees and guide organizations to incorporate new practices in HRD functions to realize the actual potential of employees (Seo 2019).

In line with the importance of HRD in today's era, theory-building has become more crucial for HRD function compared to other disciplines (Seo 2019). The literature guides that theories in applied disciplines should go beyond novelty and emphasize practical utility along with theoretical significance to help organizations in adequately managing the development of their workforce. However, recent debates in social sciences criticize and question existing theories for lack of utility and practical usefulness (Baden and Higgs 2015; Hammersley 1995; Torraco 2004). In general, the usefulness of theories in management is assessed on two primary criteria: revelatory work and scientific usefulness. Unfortunately, an essential criterion of 'practical usefulness' has not been given adequate importance in the literature (Corley and Gioia 2011). For the above reasons, the question arises about the usefulness of existing theories in HRD, and suggest researchers to develop new and practical theories for organizations (Torraco 2004).

It is crucial to understand the role of existing philosophical paradigms in the theory-building process in HRD. Overall, the theory-building process in HRD is currently dominated by a positivist philosophy (Lincoln and Lynham 2011). However, a few researchers have also used interpretivism philosophy for developing theories in HRD (e.g. Parker 2012). Overall, the use of the above philosophical paradigms has led to the development of useful knowledge, however the focus of these paradigms in a single direction and lack of comprehensiveness has resulted in practically weak theories, which might not be relevant for handling people-related issues in organizations nowadays (Seo 2019). Hence, there has been an overall lack of consensus in the literature about the usefulness of either of the above approaches for theory building in HRD.

Growing debates about the weak usefulness of existing HRD theories has motivated several researchers to move away from traditional paradigms and to adopt new approaches for advancing theoretical advancement, as well as for achieving practical usefulness (Seo 2019; Torraco 2004). In this regard, pragmatic research philosophy has emerged as a new and comprehensive paradigm for theory building in applied disciplines because of its flexible ontological and epistemological stance (Storberg-Walker 2003). It offers an adaptive and practical approach for theory building and focuses on problem identification as a basis of research (Gillberg and Vo 2014; Kilduff et al. 2011). Along with the practical usefulness, it facilitates in advancing theoretical knowledge in applied disciplines (Korte and Mercurio 2017).

Despite the usefulness of pragmatism philosophy in theory building, there has been an inadequate understanding of the mechanism for theory building in HRD using this philosophical approach. Therefore, this article compares the existing philosophical base for theory building in HRD and suggests usefulness of the ontological, epistemological and methodological stance of the pragmatic lens for theory building in HRD. It contributes to

the literature on philosophy and HRD by proposing a five-stage process and by providing step-wise guidance on how pragmatism philosophy may be used for the development of new and comprehensive theories in HRD. It is argued that researchers may use a pragmatic lens to understand the nature and intensity of people-related development challenges faced by organizations. Accordingly, the researchers may develop a flexible research design and use objective information. Finally, it also presents limitations of pragmatism philosophy and how those limitations may be adequately managed to develop reliable and verifiable theories in HRD.

The forthcoming sections compare the differences between different philosophical paradigms and suggest using pragmatism philosophy for theory building in HRD.

2 Traditional approaches to theory building in HRD

The positivism paradigm suggests that genuine and objective knowledge may be derived through sensory information from natural phenomena (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). The idea of positivism was initially introduced by Henry de Saint-Simon, Pierre-Simon Laplace, August Comte. These philosophers focused on the role of observation and reasoning for deepening an understanding of human behavior. Further, they suggested that scientific methods may be applied for understanding social phenomena, similar to of applicability of these methods in natural sciences (Egbai 2016). The proponents of positivism philosophy believe in a singular reality and rely on scientific methods for tapping those realities.

Moreover, they believe that generalization goals may be achieved in different contexts by using this philosophy (Guba and Lincoln 1989). According to them, the observer keeps their values aside from phenomena and conduct value-free research through its lens (Langley 1999). Overall, the use of positivism philosophy has led to valuable knowledge creation in HRD (e.g. Dubin 1978; Kaplan 1964), however restricted boundaries of this paradigm confines individuals to one dimension and presents an incomplete picture of the phenomena (Gioia and Pitre 1990). It is argued that the usefulness of positivist philosophy is questionable in HRD due to its diversity and multiple dimensions. Moreover, the replicability of findings in HRD research is a significant challenge for positivist researchers (Tsang and Kwan 1999). One of the questions raised against the positivism paradigm is that observers cannot separate their values from phenomena in areas like HRD because preconceptions of individuals shape an overall direction of research in applied disciplines (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004; Statler and Salovaara 2017). Finally, proponents of the positivist lens mainly focus on developing cause-effect relationships, however cause-effect relationships may not be developed explicitly in HRD because human behavior is dependent on multiple factors, and all factors cannot be tapped through cause-effect relationships (Gioia and Pitre 1990).

Based on the challenges associated with the positivism paradigm, several researchers have used the interpretivism approach for theory building in applied disciplines (e.g. Anderson 2017; Goulding 1998). Franklin Frazier suggested understanding the ways that shape people's experiences in the social world. Moreover, he suggested focusing on the concept of social constructivism and differences between realities (MacLean and Williams 2008). The proponents of the interpretivism lens believe in the existence of multiple realities and suggest tapping knowledge about phenomena through qualitative methods. Overall, Interpretivist philosophy investigates phenomena keeping in view the subjectivity of

context and provides several interpretations of phenomena (Wahyuni 2012). These philosophers believe that replicability should not be an essential requirement for the evaluation of theories in social sciences (Tsang and Kwan 1999). Overall, the interpretivism lens was useful for creating extensive knowledge in HRD (e.g. Devadas et al. 2011; Goulding 1998). However, the use of thick descriptions and narrations may lead to biased and subjective findings (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). Moreover, an increased emphasis of these researchers on narrative descriptions is helpful for researchers in explaining the causes of problems, however this lens offers limited guidance regarding offering solutions to real problems (Yvonne Feilzer 2010), as lack of predictive power offers little support in facilitating problem-solving in organizations. Finally, the interpretive lens relies mainly on qualitative techniques, hence offers fewer chances for validating the results of such theories (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2005).

Overall, positivism and interpretivism paradigms are based on two distinct ideas and offer a different lens for knowledge creation in applied disciplines, however the use of any of the above approaches may lead to a lack of comprehensive and rigid approach for theory building in HRD. Moreover, the integration of these two paradigms might complement the use of multiple research methods, and in developing an adequate understanding of organizational problems (Lee 1991; Uduma and Sylva 2015), however this integration might not help resolve practical issues in organizations. It is therefore argued that practical and novel theories may be developed through the use of a comprehensive and flexible paradigm, rather than relying on traditional philosophical approaches. In light of the complexity of the HRD field, the pragmatism philosophy might provide a comprehensive approach for developing new theories in HRD.

3 Pragmatism philosophy

Pragmatism is a philosophical approach that focuses on the crucial role of thoughts, words, and situations to predict and solve problems. Unlike other philosophical approaches, the nature of knowledge is viewed and analyzed through its practical usefulness in this approach (Gillberg and Vo 2014; Yvonne Feilzer 2010). The literature guides that pragmatism philosophy was originated in the 1870s by classical pragmatists Charles Sanders Peirce and William James. These pragmatists focused on the importance of contingent knowledge and theorizing inquiry for exploring the truth. These researchers suggested that pragmatism provides a practical lens in reflection and providing solutions (Ayer 1982). To advance an understanding of the pragmatism approach, John Dewey focused on using a pragmatic lens for initiating positive reforms in politics and education (Sleeper 2001). Dewey's pragmatism suggested that individuals' thinking is contingent on inquiry in those situations.

Moreover, he suggested integrating science with ethics and emphasized the use of a scientific approach for knowledge generation (Dewey 1938). Finally, George Herbert Mead focused on the interaction between the actor and the world. He suggested that individuals derive shared meaning from the world and make sense of the situations accordingly (Schubert 2006). Overall, these philosophers emphasized the importance of understanding problems, the environment and characteristics of a particular situation before devising any solutions. Based on the view that reality is not stable or concrete but embedded in experiences of individuals, it was suggested by these researchers that truths about society cannot be precisely revealed, as truth is a relative term that changes with time (Johnson and

Onwuegbuzie 2004; Yvonne Feilzer 2010). Therefore, proponents of pragmatic research approach integrated positivist and interpretive approaches for understanding problems in society. General characteristics of pragmatism philosophy are problem-solving, value-orientation, flexibility, acceptance towards different knowledge, knowledge management, and practical usefulness (Yvonne Feilzer 2010). Overall, a pragmatic lens suggests using a mixed-methods approach for superior knowledge creation and problem-solving in organizations (Wahyuni 2012).

Pragmatism philosophy considers qualitative and quantitative techniques of data collection as two ends on a continuum and uses a combination of research methods for problem-solving (Gillberg and Vo 2014; Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2005; Smaling 1994). Therefore, the methodological base of the pragmatism lens generally relies on the use of a mixed-method approach (Watson 2010). The logic of inquiry in mixed methods research relies on the induction process that leads to discovering new patterns and helps in understanding contexts from several angles (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004; Smaling 1994). Therefore, it provides comprehensive guidance in offering solutions to problems.

4 Existing theoretical frameworks in HRD

HRD was introduced as a separate discipline in the 1970s to focus on the set of activities that leads to positive behavioral changes and developments in employees of an organization (Pace 1987). This discipline comes under the umbrella of human resource management and has also been defined as a specific discipline that focuses on organizational development and individual development and goals (Chalofsky 1992). Knowles, McLagan, and Nadler conducted early research in this discipline and identified the importance of balancing employees' needs with organizational needs as the major challenge in HRD (McGuire and Cseh 2006). In general, HRD focuses on training and development, organizational development, and career development of employees for unleashing the hidden talents of their employees through the process of lifelong learning (Bierema and Eraut 2004). Several dimensions in HRD are linked with several social, economic, and other complex factors that need to be integrated with fluid mechanisms to reveal underlying complex mechanisms of HRD (Reason 2003; Storberg-Walker 2003). These topics are applied in nature, which requires researchers to focus more on answering the question 'how' rather than focusing solely on 'what' and 'why' of situations (Klikauer 2014; Lynham 2000).

In line with the above, the role of theories is particularly crucial in HRD because theories provide objective guidance for applying research reforms in organizations (Seo 2019). In line with the above, Torraco (1997) also suggests that a theory helps in explaining phenomena as well as guides about the ways for applying them. Hence the role of theories is crucial in HRD. However, limited specific theories exist in HRD, such as Swanson (1995) proposed a three-dimensional HRD model and included psychological, economic, and system aspects in the framework. The psychological perspective focused on cognitive-based theories and highlighted the role of internal factors in the learning of individuals (McLean 1998). The learning theory was mainly originated from psychology and focused on individuals' ability to modify their behavior permanently. Although several definitions of learning have been proposed in the HRD literature, however three major approaches to learning were behaviorism, cognitivism and humanism (Weinberger 1998). The economic aspect aims to understand the value of people and how skills are developed in individuals over time (McLean 1998). One of the significant examples of the above is a human capital

theory, which suggests that organizations invest in human capital to grow their skills and develop their future (Becker 1975). Finally, the systems perspective focused on an integrated approach and highlighted the role of interaction among several internal and external factors in the development of individuals. The researchers focused on organizational learning to highlight the importance of system-level learning in this approach (Dixon 1992).

Although these theoretical perspectives previously helped in developing inter-relationships between theory and practical issues and facilitated in improving the learning of employees in organizations through developing an alignment between individual and organizational needs (Baker 2009; Hamlin et al. 1998). However, there has been a weak understanding of the linkage between theories in HRD and practice in today's world, where the emerging area is virtual HRD (Mutamba 2017). Therefore, I suggest researchers integrate technology and HRD with theories to develop a better understanding of these inter-relationships.

5 Challenges of theory development in HRD

Despite recognizing the need for developing new theories in HRD in recent literature, researchers face challenges in developing new theories in HRD for many reasons. First, although literature in HRD emphasis the need to develop new theories in HRD to bridge the existing gaps between HRD research and practice and to achieve professionalism in this field. However, most organizations still face intense challenges while implementing those theories. One of the primary reasons behind these implementation challenges is rapid advancements and continuous changes in the external environment, making it difficult for organizations to apply new theories (Seo 2019). For example, Covid-19 has resulted in the introduction of new technologies in organizations, resulting in changes in people's ways of work and their priorities. However, limited recent literature in HRD offers limited guidance on managing people's development in these circumstances (e.g. Yawson 2020).

Second, some literature guides that theory-building approaches in HRD need to be altered because existing theories in HRD don't focus adequately on achieving people's development (Kwon and Park 2019). It is argued that existing theories in HRD might be less effective because they are borrowed from management or based on the integration of theories from other disciplines. For example, most of the existing theories in HRD have been borrowed from psychology, sociology and business (McGuire and Cseh 2006). Thus overall theoretical base in HRD is still immature due to heavy reliance on other disciplines (Seo 2019). For example, some literature suggests that economic theories adversely affect HRD, as ideas of selfishness and personal interest were based on economic assumptions. HRD researchers adopted those assumptions and initiated changes in institutional designs and arrangements for the growth and development of people based on those false assumptions (Ferraro et al. 2005).

Third, HRD is characterized by humans, and their changing behavioral patterns may not be objectively tapped. Therefore, it gets difficult for researchers to develop theories with concrete results in these fields (Watson 2010, 2016). Moreover, challenges of theory evaluation criteria create additional barriers for HRD researchers. In general, theories are considered as good when they are plausible and exciting. Due to these criteria, researchers focus on ways to differentiate their theories from others rather than focusing on the practical implications of those theories (Astley 1985). Based on the above challenges of theory development in HRD, it is argued that there is a need to develop new, practical and relevant

theories in HRD. Hence, the forthcoming sections propose how the use of pragmatism might help develop a new framework for theory development in HRD.

6 A new framework for theory building in HRD

The previous section elaborates on some of the complexities and challenges associated with theory building in HRD. Based on the view that processes in HRD are complex and interlinked with several internal and external forces, it is suggested that the use of comprehensive and multifaceted perspectives and methods would be more useful in developing realistic theories in this domain (Lynham 2000, 2002; Storberg-Walker 2003; Van de Ven 1989). Moreover, researchers may develop meaningful and practical theories in management by focusing on details of a problem statement and by using multiple selection criteria for testing those theories (Weick 1989). Based on the practical, dynamic and complex nature of the HRD discipline, it is argued that theories in HRD should be assessed on the parameters of relevance, application and problem-solving.

To meet the above objectives, researchers must select the right research paradigm for adequately covering all the aspects of the problems. In this regard, pragmatism philosophy may provide a useful lens for developing a flexible and inclusive framework for theory building in HRD, as it offers a comprehensive world view to the researchers (Yvonne Feilze 2010) and uses a multiparadigm approach for developing new theories (Gioia and Pitre 1990). The ontological stance of pragmatism supports the existence of multiple realities and how realities change over time. The epistemological stance of pragmatism philosophy endorses the use of objective and subjective sources for gathering data. Along with the above, informing the action of a pragmatic perspective helps researchers in quickly understanding core issues in organizations (Watson 2010), which is identified as one of the aspects of theory development in HRD. It is argued that researchers will have a higher level of flexibility and freedom in developing new theories if they will approach problems from the lens of a pragmatic approach. Therefore, I suggest that the use of a pragmatic lens might be helpful for HRD researchers in smoothly connecting the theoretical base of their investigation with people-related development challenges in organizations. Hence, these theories might facilitate individuals to propose innovative HRD practices for managing and developing people in a better way.

Along with the above, existing theories in HRD focus on performance outcomes of employees, while there has been an inadequate focus on behavioral and attitudinal outcomes of employees (Holton 2002). In this regard, Hugh Willmott and Tony Watson adequately linked pragmatism philosophy with business management and guided the usefulness of combining sociological imagination pragmatism in a business context for developing relevant theories (Watson 1997, 2010; Willmott 1996). Moreover, these researchers provide direction on how organizations can manage employees' issues by focusing on practical theories using a pragmatic lens (Watson and Watson 1999; Watson 2004). The contributions of these researchers helped us in developing an objective linkage between the issues faced by employees and use of the pragmatism approach in resolving those issues. However, despite having a clear direction about the usefulness of this paradigm in HRD, there has been an overall weak progression in the development of believable and practical solutions for organizations because of lack of step-wise approach.

Based on the above, it is suggested that the step-wise framework for theory building in HRD may be developed using a pragmatic lens. It integrates some characteristics of

other philosophical approaches as well (Reason 2003). For example, the post-positivism paradigm goes beyond positivism and suggests an important role of researchers' values in the investigation (Henderson 2011). This flexibility is also a part of pragmatism philosophy. Also, critical realism approach distinguishes the real world from the observable world. It suggests an essential role of individuals thinking in the research process (Hall 2013), which links this philosophy with the pragmatism perspective. Therefore, pragmatism lens provides flexibility in incorporating several factors (Storberg-Walker 2006) and is likely to present an integrated framework for theory building that might be quickly adopted and implemented by organizations.

To achieve the above goals, pragmatism philosophy offers the use of flexible methods. Overall, problems and real challenges guide the methodology of pragmatic researches, unlike other philosophical approaches where methodology guides an overall direction of research. Pragmatic researchers believe that the selection of a research methodology moves according to their research question (Reason 2003). Therefore, along with the other benefits, using a pragmatic position is likely to bridge the gaps and minimize conflicts between other paradigms through interactions between paradigms.

7 A five-stage framework for theory building in HRD

A large number of researchers have identified the practical usefulness of pragmatic research philosophy. This literature guides on the use of multiple approaches for the development of meaningful theories in management, as mono-method is one of the biggest threats to research in management (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2005). For example, Eisenhardt (1989) focused on the essence of the case-study approach for deepening an understanding of organizational problems. Similarly, several researchers suggested combining more multiple methods in a single framework for objectively understanding problems in organizations and for developing thorough theories in management (Gioia and Pitre 1990; Langley 1999; Lynham 2002). Most of the above literature recommends developing new theories in management by using multiple methods such as case study approach, disciplined imagination, meta-triangulation and other techniques.

Although the above literature indirectly supports the pragmatic philosophy and provides guidance on selecting appropriate research methods for generating knowledge in HRD, however limited guidance was offered about the process that might be followed by researchers for theory building in HRD. For example, Weick (1989) provided some guidance on the importance of engaging in sense-making about the different aspects of the problems before selecting a particular method. Similarly, some guidance was provided on the importance of using multiple paradigms for developing a thorough understanding of the organizational problems (Lewis and Grimes 1999; Pentland 1999). Despite some guidance from the above literature, there has been a lack of clarity regarding the specific process for theory development in HRD.

Combining the fragmented literature from the above areas with pragmatism philosophy, HRD discipline and Storberg-Walker (2006) logic, a five-step approach for theory building in HRD has been proposed. In Stage-1, researchers may evaluate a specific contextual environment and identify how organizations currently manage the development of their employees at individual, team and organization levels. Further, it is essential for researchers to understand the type and nature of organizations at this stage. In this regard, the HRD literature identifies four major types of organizational structures including flat,

bureaucratic, divisional and matrix organizations (Wang and Ahmed 2003). Based on the use of a specific organizational structure in different industries, employees' development is uniquely managed in various sectors. For example, flat organizations offer enhanced flexibility and autonomy to employees and mainly rely upon on-job trainings and development techniques as opposed to bureaucratic organizations, where employees' development is not a self-managed activity. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to initially consider the role of these differences while evaluating the existing level of employees' development to get an accurate idea of development related deficiencies. Alongside this, they may examine the role of existing theories in addressing these issues. Based on identifying the gaps, they may conceptualize a new idea or decide to revise an existing area of HRD. Conceptualization of the problem using pragmatism philosophy would be helpful for researchers in including all the relevant factors in a single framework at this stage. One of the significant reasons behind the slow progression in theoretical advancement in HRD is the vast focus of researchers on the learning and development of individuals only (Seo 2019). Hence, I would suggest researchers go beyond the existing ideas and conceptualize new areas in HRD. For example, future researchers may go beyond individuals' learning and focus on how individualized changes in behavior and attitude of employees relate to individual, systems and organizational level learning. Similarly, there are overlapping factors between several theories in HRD e.g. systems theory presents most of the factors that are part of learning and performance improvement theories (Dixon 1992). Hence, researchers may think of integrating relevant concepts in a single framework to simplify existing theoretical perspectives.

In Stage-2, the researchers can operationalize all the relevant variables to specify the nature of the problems faced by organizations. In this regard, it would be advisable for researchers to particularly focus on problems faced by bureaucratic organizations because of a lack of emphasis on employees' growth, development and empowerment in these organizations. The use of pragmatism philosophy would be helpful for researchers in going beyond existing literature and practically operationalizing variables. Moreover, researchers may gather some preliminary information using primary and secondary resources at this stage. Analysis of preliminary information would be helpful for researchers in objectively including all the relevant factors in their theoretical framework. Accordingly, possible causes of the challenges may be identified and connected with the factors inside organizations. One of the major benefits of the use of pragmatism philosophy at this stage is that it allows individuals to simultaneously develop different perspectives and use their imagination for comprehending problems from several viewpoints. For example, researchers who aim to understand how individualized change experiences of employees relate to individual and organizational learning may integrate identity theory and social identity theory from the literature with the HRD learning models to hypothesize relationships between individualized factors and learning process in organizations, particularly after the Covid-19 crisis.

In Stage-3, researchers can develop a flexible research design driven by the proposed relationships identified in Stage-2. The use of pragmatic research philosophy would be helpful for researchers in holistically understanding potential research designs and how several perspectives may complement each other. Humans experience changes in their emotional states over time. Hence researchers need to specify the right level of analysis, objective sampling process, and data analysis techniques at this stage. It is suggested that the use of multiple methods would be helpful for researchers in meeting verifiability and plausibility criteria as well. In this regard, researchers may integrate multiple methods through the use of multi-method or mixed-method approaches. A multi-method approach offers a comprehensive and flexible framework as more than one methods (of any type) may be integrated into the research (Anguera et al.

2018). On the other hand, mixed-method approach provides a relatively confined framework (Sale et al. 2002), where at least one qualitative and one quantitative research method must be integrated (Creswell 2014; Miller and Gatta 2006) in either parallel or sequential stage in a mixed-method approach (Anguera et al. 2018). Moreover, the focus of mixed-method research is to gain understanding of a single research objective using one of the four types of strategies: triangulation design, embedded design, explanatory design and exploratory design (Creswell 2014), which reflects strict methodological boundaries of a mixed-methods approach. To advance knowledge base in HRD discipline, future researchers are recommended to particularly integrate exploratory research design for discovering new factors that may lead to employees' development in the current challenging times. Overall, the use of multi-method approach would also be useful for theory building in those areas of HRD, where researchers would cover multiple and diverse areas of HRD, while utilization of mixed-methods would facilitate researchers in deepening an understanding of specific areas. For example, future researchers may use the above methodological approach to develop specific and enhanced understanding of how novel online tools or software may be uniquely used for enhancing employees' empowerment and development during and after the Covid-19 period. Based on the analysis of the data, results may be developed accordingly.

In Stage-4, researchers may analyze the results and present specific solutions that may be applied in organizations. Proposed solutions are applied in organizations to understand the applicability of the theory in organizations and the utility of newly introduced theories. The use of a pragmatic lens allows researchers to understand the nature of differences between stakeholders and proposes solutions accordingly. For example, if findings of a theory suggest focusing on investing in human capital in organizations for improving their learning in the long run, the researchers may analyze the internal environment of an organization, their existing capabilities and resources. Accordingly, they may suggest large organizations to introduce off-job training programs for employees to focus exclusively on developing new skills. On the other hand, small organizations with limited resources may invest in their employees by integrating specific on-job training programs.

The pragmatic philosophy acknowledges that phenomena changes over time and those changes need to be continuously addressed in the theory-building process. Therefore, researchers must gather information from organizations about their changing circumstances and ways of work in Stage-5. Based on the above, the theory-building process should not end after applying proposed solutions in organizational settings. Instead, researchers should continuously refine knowledge, analyze new trends, update theories, and suggest new suggestions to organizations. This stage might be particularly useful for researchers in enhancing HRD theories in the current situation when employees' ways of work have been entirely changed after the Covid-19 crisis. For example, researchers in HRD may evaluate how the initiation of new technologies and flexible work styles have impacted the learning and development of employees in the current circumstances. Accordingly, the researchers may integrate new factors such as technological advancements to update existing theories in HRD and suggest new solutions to organizations for adequately managing the skills development of their employees through several online mediums.

8 Discussion

The previous section uses the pragmatic lens to propose a step-wise framework for theory building in HRD. The above framework would provide a wide lens and offer several benefits to future researchers in the theory-building process in HRD. However, some limitations are also associated with the use of the pragmatism approach in the theory-building process. Hence, the current section highlights those limitations and offers suggestions for overcoming the same in light of the proposed framework. First, pragmatism philosophy puts more emphasis on applied research and problem solving as compared to basic research. As a result, researchers keep their primary emphasis on understanding organizational context and pay minimum attention to the theoretical rigor. Hence, the use of pragmatism philosophy leads to incremental innovation and weak theoretical contributions. To overcome this challenge in the theory-building process, I suggest future researchers do a thorough critical review of the existing literature and theories in HRD at Stage-1 and Stage-2. Future researchers may integrate a problem-solving approach with solid theoretical grounding to develop links between existing research and organizations' problems.

Second, the use of a pragmatic approach in HRD might generate useful findings for specific organizations, which cannot be generalized beyond those situations. For overcoming the generalization challenges, future researchers need to develop a flexible research design. Although pragmatism philosophy helps provide practical solutions to the organizational problems, however newly developed theories in HRD should not be guided by problems of few organizations. In light of the above, I suggest future researchers develop a comprehensive research design at Stage-3 of the proposed framework and collect data from many organizations before presenting a new theory in HRD.

Third, pragmatism philosophy utilizes the use of research methods, which may lead to biasness issues and in reaching objective consensus. This challenge may be adequately managed by integrating multiple methods in a research design and by involving different levels of management in the data collection process. Moreover, qualitative data, such as interviews, should be double-coded and analyzed by more than one researcher to prevent biasness challenges and reach objective conclusions.

Finally, validity challenges and criteria for judgment of pragmatic theories are also concerns for the researchers, which discourage them from using a pragmatic approach. It is suggested that utility and falsifiability, should also be valued along with generalizability in applied fields. It is argued that the criteria for judgment should vary in basic and applied disciplines (Pace 1987). Theories should be judged based on their simplicity, comprehensiveness, fruitfulness, precision, and clarity in applied fields like HRD. Overall, it would be challenging to measure the above parameters. However, the use of a step-wise approach, along with the use of multiple methods, would be helpful for researchers to adequately verify and test the validity of the theories in HRD based on the above parameters.

9 Theoretical implications

The theoretical debate in this paper emphasizes the value of integrating pragmatism philosophy in the theory-building process in HRD and suggests that the use of pragmatism lens with HRD may lead to the creation of novel theories that might help manage a balance between research and reform. This section presents the theoretical implications of the

current research and suggests ideas for further research to advance knowledge. First, the idea regarding the use of different philosophical approaches for theory building in applied disciplines has already been highlighted in some literature (e.g. Gioia and Pitre 1990; Kilduff et al. 2011; Wahyuni 2012). However, there was fragmentation and a lack of connectivity between these fields. This article assembles existing literature from distinct fields and understands the various philosophical approaches and their roles in the theory-building process. Based on the above, it would be easier to compare and contrast the strengths of philosophical paradigms in the theory-building process.

Second, this article keeps an exclusive focus on the HRD domain and develops a linkage between philosophical paradigms and theory building in HRD. It presents summarized details of existing theories in HRD and why those theories might not be relevant for people-related problem-solving in organizations nowadays. Third, despite having a consensus in the literature regarding the importance of the use of pragmatism approach in applied disciplines, the process for theory building in HRD remained unclear. In this regard, researchers such as Torraco, Onwuegbuzie and a few other researchers offers a thorough understanding of the use of pragmatism philosophy in the existing HRD frameworks in the work settings. For example, Torraco (1999) elaborates how theories of situated learning and distributed cognition may be uniquely used in work settings. Also, Onwuegbuzie and colleagues (2009) offer a comprehensive philosophical framework that laid the basis of mixed methods in HRM.

Moreover, Lynham (2002) and Storberg-Walker (2006) offered some guidance on how imagination can be translated to the application for the development of new theories in HRD. However, the dynamic and complex nature of people-related changes were not adequately highlighted in previous literature. Moreover, changes in the nature of people development issues, particularly after Covid-19 require researchers to develop new ideas in HRD. Therefore, this article proposes a step-five approach and suggests systematic and in-depth stages for theory building in HRD through the pragmatic perspective. Moreover, it presents specific examples of how existing theories in HRD may be useful in this process.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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